

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**CONSERVATION CROP ROTATION**

**(ac.)**

**CODE 328**

**DEFINITION**

Growing crops in a recurring sequence on the same field.

**PURPOSE**

This practice may be applied as part of a conservation management system to support one or more of the following:

- Reduce sheet and rill erosion.
- Reduce irrigation induced erosion.
- Maintain or improve soil organic matter content.
- Manage deficient or excess plant nutrients.
- Improve water use efficiency.
- Manage saline seeps.
- Manage plant pests (weeds, insects, diseases).

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

This practice does not apply to pastureland, hayland, or other land uses where annual row or close growing crops are grown occasionally only to facilitate renovation or re-establishment of perennial vegetation. It does not apply to land devoted to orchards, vineyards, or nurseries.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable To All Purposes Named Above**

Crops shall be grown in a planned, recurring sequence except as outlined in Operation and Maintenance.

Crops shall be adapted to the climatic region and the soil resource. Adapted crops and varieties, listed in appropriate Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service Crop Production Handbooks.

A conservation crop rotation may include crops planted for cover or nutrient enhancement.

**Additional Criteria To Reduce Sheet And Rill Erosion**

Crops shall be selected that produce enough above and below ground plant biomass to control erosion within the soil loss tolerance (T) or any other planned soil loss objective.

The amount of biomass needed shall be determined using current approved erosion prediction technology.

Calculations shall account for the effects of other practices in the conservation management system.

**Additional Criteria To Maintain Or Improve Soil Organic Matter Content**

Crops shall be selected that produce the amount of plant biomass needed to maintain soil organic matter content, as determined using the current approved Soil Conditioning Index Procedure.

If partial removal of residue by means such as baling or grazing occurs, enough residue shall be maintained to achieve the desired soil organic matter content goal.

Cover and green manure crops planted specifically for soil improvement may be grazed, as long as grazing is managed to retain adequate biomass.

#### **Additional Criteria To Manage Deficient Or Excess Plant Nutrients**

Crop selection and sequence shall be determined using an approved nutrient balance procedure.

When crop rotations are designed to add nitrogen to the system, nitrogen-fixing crops shall be grown immediately prior to or interplanted with nitrogen-depleting crops.

To reduce excess nutrients, crops or cover crops having rooting depths and nutrient requirements that utilize the excess nutrients shall be grown.

#### **Additional Criteria To Improve Water Use Efficiency**

Selection of crops and varieties, sequence of crops, or the annual decision to plant a crop or to fallow, shall be determined using an approved water balance procedure.

#### **Additional Criteria To Manage Plant Pests (Weeds, Insects, Diseases)**

Crops shall be alternated to break the pest cycle and/or allow for the use of a variety of other control methods. Affected crops and alternate host crops shall be removed from the rotation for the period of time needed to break the life cycle of the targeted pest.

Resistant varieties, listed in appropriate university publications or other approved sources, shall be selected where there is a history of a pest problem.

#### **Additional Criteria To Provide Food For Domestic Livestock**

Crops shall be selected to balance the feed supply with livestock numbers. The needed amount of selected crops shall be determined using an approved forage-livestock balance procedure. (Refer to the National Range and Pasture Handbook, Chapter 5, Section 3).

#### **Additional Criteria To Provide Food And Cover For Wildlife**

Crop selection shall be determined using an approved NRCS habitat evaluation procedure.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

When used in combination with STRIPCROPPING CONTOUR (585), the crop sequence should be consistent with the stripcropping design.

When used in combination with RESIDUE MANAGEMENT practices, selection of high residue producing crops and varieties, use of cover crops, and adjustment of plant population and row spacing can enhance production of the kind, amount, and distribution of residue needed.

Where maintaining or improving soil organic matter content is an objective, the effects of this practice can be enhanced by managing crop residues, utilizing animal wastes, or applying mulches to supplement the biomass produced by crops in the rotation.

Where excess plant nutrients or soil contaminants are a concern, rotating deep rooted crops or cover crops with shallow rooted crops can help recover the nutrient or contaminant from the soil profile.

Where precipitation is limited, seasonal or erratic, moisture can be conserved from crop use by maintaining crop residues on the soil surface to increase infiltration and to reduce runoff and evaporation. Where winter precipitation occurs as snow, additional moisture can be obtained for crop use by windbreaks, or other barriers.

Where improving water use efficiency on deep soils is a concern, rotating deep rooted crops with shallow rooted crops can help utilize all available water in the soil profile.

Soil compaction can be reduced by this practice when rotations including deep rooted crops (able to extend to and penetrate the compacted soil layers) are used in combination with deep tillage, controlled traffic, or management of grazing animals to prevent, or breakup, compacted layers.

## **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Specifications for establishment and operation of this practice shall be prepared for each field or treatment unit according to the Criteria, Considerations, and Operation and Maintenance described in this standard.

Specifications shall be recorded using approved specification sheets, job sheets, narrative statements in the conservation plan, or other acceptable documentation.

## **OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

Rotations shall provide for acceptable substitute crops in case of crop failure or shift in planting intentions for weather related or economic reasons. Acceptable substitutes are crops having similar properties that meet the criteria for all the resource concerns identified for the field or treatment unit.

In areas where summer fallow is practiced, the decision to plant a crop or fallow shall be made annually based on soil moisture at planting time. Fields shall be fallowed only when soil moisture is not adequate to produce a crop. If moisture supply is adequate but limited, shortseason shallow rooted crops shall be selected and grown. Deep rooted crops shall follow shallow rooted crops in subsequent years, if needed, to utilize all plant available water in the root zone